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THE POET'S MIND.

BY MAX EASTMAN.

"You objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give them shape!"

"We realize the soul only by you, you faithful solids and fluids."

—*Walt Whitman.*

UPON most subjects the mystic and materialist are added together and a quotient is taken for wisdom. But upon the definition of poetry any mechanic, if he is wise in the love of it, will give you the mystic's answer. We search literature in vain for a clear formula; we find, for the most part, vague words and wonder. "Is not poetry to be referred to some previous state of sensation and existence?" "It is the breath and finer sense of all knowledge," "truth carried alive into the heart by passion." It is "word-painting," "the production of an illusion upon the imagination," a "fine frenzy." Saint Augustine called it "devil's wine." Lord Macaulay, who was sane even in error, declared poetry to be a form of insanity. Charles Lamb, who was better acquainted with both poetry and insanity, made a point of denying this. The poet gives us, he says, "by what subtle tracing of the mental process we are not philosopher enough to determine," a sound and rational vagary. Carlyle ventures beyond this paradox, and explains that "Poetry is musical thought." The condition of past literature upon the subject expresses the attitude of the average reflective mind. It appears that this mystery has escaped longer than any other the inroads of science.

It is ungrateful to try to explain a wonder. It is a task not to be undertaken unless for some good purpose. To my mind, a psychological analysis of the material of literary art furnishes the only sound basis for the study of it, and it is with this end in view that I approach the old question of the nature of poetry.

Perhaps an improved understanding of it would also help those who desire to produce that mysterious effect.

The attempt to confine the "Essence of Poetry," which is quicksilver, within the limits of a definition has been made in two ways—first, by describing its subject-matter, as the true, the beautiful, the sublime, the fanciful, the good; and, second, by describing its mode of expression, as metrical or measured language. A thousand efforts of the first kind have failed. They were generally put forth by poets, and each succeeded in defining, not poetry, but *his* poetry. Coleridge is the wisest of them, for he surprises you at the end of his argument with this statement: "Poetry of the highest kind can exist without metre and without the contradistinguishing objects of a poem." That irrational sentence was meant to admit the Hebrew prophets, but it also left a place for Walt Whitman, whose still contested title gives my argument a special reason for being. Whitman shows that the subject-matter of poetry is limited only by the power and enthusiasm of the poet; he demands that we should reconsider our definitions. Onward experience is the bugbear of philosophy. Great men do not make definitions but burst them. The little men are always mending their nets.

The second way of defining poetry has had more apparent success. "Metrical speech," we are told; the poet is one who never says his opinions straight out, but distorts them to fit a beautiful but irrelevant pattern. The Rhetoric and many people like it are satisfied with this. "Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry"—this is Edgar Allan Poe; "music without the idea is simply music, the idea without the music is prose." We like such lucidity, and we like the terse and irreverent American who said it. But we think he was hardly big enough to evolve a philosophy of poetry; that he scarce knew his own genius, nor could fathom the hearts of which he has doubtless for moments become the mouthpiece. Mysticism, agnosticism, reverence, humility—whatever it is in us that is so precious—makes us recoil from his words. We love poetry because in it we find ourselves and the universe. We do not make the same treasure of mere verse and a pleasurable idea.

However, lest we fall out with the dictionary, it must be stated that the word "poetry" means metrical speech. In this meaning it is applied to those portions of our magazines in which

the printing does not run out to the margin. But poetry has another meaning, a more subtle one—a magic that can hardly be imputed to the arrangement of its syllables. Especially we use the words “poet” and “poetic,” in a great and free sense, to describe types and attitudes of mind as well as uses of language. “My singing, be sure, is very husky, and is for the most part in prose,” Emerson says. “Still, I am a poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in matter, and especially of the correspondences between these and those.” And Tolstoy describes a man as “endowed with the faculty of vividly realizing his subject, which is the essence of the poetic gift.” We have but the one word with two meanings, and it is the second meaning that is important.

Much poetry lives that is not musical, but all merely musical verses perish. We find in the midst of drear volumes a sudden life and intimateness, which makes us exclaim, “That was a *poetic* sentence!” And we have in our too meagre and prosaic intercourse electric moments where music is out of the question, and which we likewise call poetic. This charm which can swing down into the most wretched lives and circumstances is what makes poetry sacred. It is by this that the poets live, and are translated, and become universal. It is a secondary thing that they love tuneful language. Rhythm is only the child of poetry. Here are some lines which, robbed of their musical excellence, retain all the wonder:

“Then I shall become the bride of grief.”

“The invisible skylark with its song is like an unbodied joy.”

And the metre of this poem was born in the heart of the translator:

“Though your sins be as scarlet,
They shall be as white as snow;
Though they be red like crimson,
They shall be as wool.”

That which gives wings to prose and soul to verse I call, rather than music, the poetic principle. It is related of the cowherd, Cædmon, who became the father of English poetry, that:

“when well advanced in years he had learned nothing of the art of verse, the alliterative jingle so popular among his fellows. Wherefore, being sometimes at feasts, when all agreed for glee’s sake to sing in

turn, he no sooner saw the harp come towards him than he rose from the board and turned homeward.

"Once when he had done this, and gone from the feast to the stable where he had that night charge of the cattle, there appeared to him in his sleep one who said, greeting him by name, 'Sing, Cædmon, some song to me.' 'I cannot sing,' he answered; 'for this cause left I the feast and came hither.' He who talked with him answered, 'However that may be, you shall sing to me.' 'What shall I sing?' returned Cædmon. 'The beginning of created things,' replied he.

"In the morning, the cowherd stood before Hild and told his dream. Abbess and brethren alike concluded that that heavenly grace had been conferred on him by the Lord!"

With that story we can conclude our retrospect, for it suggests the new theme. The poet is not one who can make an alliterative jingle, but one who can go out into the barn and have a vision.

A deep-reaching division that we can make of human minds is this: those which contain vivid images and those which contain almost no images. There are persons who love concrete experience, nature, reverie, art for its own sake, and the present idea regardless of where it leads; and there are persons who love abstract thinking, affairs, statistics, art for its meaning, and the present idea only for its practical issue. The first are poetic, and the second are prosaic. The essence of poetry, in this human meaning, is imagined sense-experience. All language parts away on one side and the other before this principle. In prose you labor to apprehend a meaning; in poetry you enjoy a sensation which, perhaps, tells you a meaning. This universal difference is rooted in the origin of tongues, and branches in the highest apprehensions of metaphysics. Poetry is effective figure; practical language is non-figurative or disfigurative.

In order to grasp the distinction between these kinds of speech, you must discover in your own mind the difference between the logical meaning and the imaginative cargo of thought. In every process there is that skeleton logic, invisible, intangible, that your reason apprehends; but with every process there is also the figure, the garment, seen, heard, touched, apprehended (however vaguely) by the imagination. There is not a more purely logical process than counting from one to a hundred; yet who is without a picture of those numbers in space relations,—a winding and bending over a page, over a prairie, a slow ascent, an odd march of marionettes, or the simple succession of them at

his eye or ear? Never a man was put to sleep yet by the bare logical apprehension of successive numbers. You can remember, if you will, a hundred imaginative customs of your thought, which you compared with those of your sister and brother in childhood,—each depending probably upon the circumstances in which you first learned a meaning. Over every day and moment of mean occupation, and reason pottering in trivialities, there abides half-realized this float of emerging and receding visions—vistas straight into fairyland. The poet masters, clarifies, and gives to us in language the sensuous content of his thought, and *through* that we come at his meaning. It is the same in argument, exposition, narration, and description. For in the latter two he voices such details as will convey, not the knowledge of an event or object, but the sense-perception of it. “In the forest,” says prose; “Where the deer’s swift leap startles the wild bee from the foxglove bell,” says poetry. “Last April,” says prose; “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,” says poetry.

In this we have the corroboration of Oriental art. For in the Japanese Hokku, or poem of a single line, “significant imagery” is the aim and substance, there being no room for jingling accoutrements. Upon analysis, it appears that in each case the title of these poems is a practical statement, which the verse repeats in poetry. I quote an example from an English critic: “The subject had been a ‘Spring Breeze,’ and to understand the significance of the verse we must remember that in Japan carpenters plane their wood in the open air, and that the curling wood-shaving is the exact shape of the Japanese letter ‘no.’ Here is the poem:

“‘As I walked past the carpenter’s, the no-letters chased me down the lane.’”

Figurative language is the primary mode of expression, prose the secondary. By “primary,” I mean not only primitive but immediate and vital, conveying the actual content of one’s thought to another. Let us grasp this again introspectively. A word that comes to my mind is “junction.” Few minds will be content to present to themselves simply the appearance or the sound of that word for a substantive, and wait for its application in a particular instance. We are quick to form a vague picture of two things coming together, two undefined objects which shall represent the abstract conception. And if our mind is feverish

or electric with passion, the picture is more defined, there even appears a particular instance (perhaps the first in connection with which the word was understood), which stands for "junction" in the abstract, until a new concrete is given by the completion of the sentence. "Let there be a junction between your ideals and your daily life." But even here we are somewhat at a loss to attain an image. Something above reaches down upon something below, something light touches upon something drab-colored, or a vagueness from heaven swims over the picture of yourself in practical costume—the difference depending upon the circumstances under which you have learned and used the word "ideal," the word "junction," and the words "daily life." But, whatever form it takes, it is inevitably vague and un-emerging,—unsatisfying, because it leaves you all of the pictorial work to do. In short, it is prosaic. "Hitch your wagon to a star." That is poetic. That gleams into your mind, scorning all of the three words which were more or less incompatible with each other, and putting in their place one visual experience, which abides. It is genius perfecting the natural method of the mind. There is a poetic quality in all thought, but it is a muddled and dark and incongruous poetry that we create in our own minds as we read prose.

This difference between the logic of abstract words and their actual content in reverie is brought out whenever we are called upon to explain their meaning. Suppose we are questioned by a child. We flounder in definitions a while, and then we fall back upon some *picturesque* illustration or analogy, and we are understood. Children are poetic, as language is in its childhood. They are in the position of the metaphysicians, groping ever farther than the experience covered by their present vocabularies. Both can be good poets. Poetry is thought clothed in its own form; prose is thought clothed in the forms of words.

Creative thought advances by symbolism and analogy. Any scholar can convey to you in paragraphs a considerable observation upon the nature of the universe or of man; but a poet gives you one impassioned line, and not the line but the thought is there. This is the difference through all time between the literature of learning and the literature of genius. For creation is accompanied by a passion which will rarely relinquish the living form of its thought to a wordy garment. It will master words.

But, if poetry clothes thought in its natural form, why do we speak prose? How does thought come to be otherwise clothed? It is custom and the complexities of practical life that destroy poetry. Poetry is not altogether sociable, for it emphasizes the part of a man's thought which is peculiar to him. The image is individual, the meaning is common. So in the process of drawing together, and of hurrying to our ends, we forget the value of the unique moment. There is no time in a loquacious sentence to mind the consistency of one's figures, and words destroy each other. But look into the history of the birth of one word, and you will see visions. In the dictionary is the heart of the supreme poem, the first epic, the upbuilding of human thought. There, in the wide symbolism of language, it is seen under what forms we have beheld our outward universe, and by what subtle work of analogy we have blended that with the widening panorama of the spirit.

Language is poetry, and prose is withered language. Every poet who tries to write is made aware that language is always dying and being born again.* This makes the trouble about mixed figures. If a phrase has become so common as to have lost its pictorial quality, it may become the ingredient of a new and more comprehensive figure; but if it still conveys a picture of its own, then the union will be incongruous. Yet if we bear in mind those forgotten origins, all language is a mixture of figures. So long as we spoke simply, we spoke poetically; but when we became complex we had to mind our logic, and that primitive poetry died. But here and there grows a man whose thought is an elixir to language. By no means will he let his visions fall misfit into the patterns of old expression. Com-

* "Insult" means to "jump upon," but it has lost for us its picture-quality, it is merely a label which we apply to certain complex forms of conduct. But the true word, the poet's word, is revived in the growth of new language. In slang we denote all these complex forms of conduct by a single sense-experience, we say we "get jumped on."

An example of the death of poetic language through custom is found in our treatment of the Bible. Its phrases are reiterated until all the imagery is lost out of them. A symbol, like "The Lamb of God," becomes a title merely.

"Crown him with many crowns,
The Lamb upon his throne"—

we sing, in sleepy oblivion of the ridiculous picture. Thus the living forms of language become conventionalized, but without acquiring a new geometric grace like the lotus and the *fleur-de-lis*. There are a great many dead hymns.

binning these faded figures, he fashions a new language which bodies the thing in a form to be, not apprehended, but beheld; and we, beholding, think that we have found out our own thoughts at last, and we become his disciples.

It will be seen that the difference between poetic and practical language is a difference of degree rather than of kind. Much rhetoric is upon the border-line, and aims to combine the lucid coherence of prose with an occasional delay and excursion of poetry. It will also be seen that poetry is a universal possession and no parlor-art, though we call only him a "poet" whose eye is restive under the least restraint, and who will say nothing if he cannot show you the vivid paintings of his mind. Isaiah and Whitman are of the same mental temper, where they kindle us, as Milton and Shelley. Whether they hold ill or well to the steel rails of logic, in this they are alike, that their first loyalty is not to the roadbed, but to the harmonies of earth and heaven through which it leads. For that outward glance they are joined together as the seers of history, the poets, the makers of vision.

Milton said that poetry must be simple, sensuous and impassioned. "Sensuous" I take to be the defining attribute, and how simple or how impassioned is a matter for artistic judgment. That sensuousness is *ideal*, it is the work of restless imagination. But now there is a *real* element of sense in all language—the sound or appearance of the words. This real sensation often supplants the ideal part of your thinking. And if this real sensation can be made enjoyable, and if you have a feeble imagination, perhaps you will like it better than true poetry.

The word "Beauty" itself, for instance, has a certain wealth both of sound and figure, and verse-makers will tell you how to combine it with other words so as to increase that effect. Then you will let the written or spoken word replace the vision, as Plato did when he forswore personification and declared the contemplation of abstract qualities to be the true form of worship. Out of this has arisen the shallow art of writing prose in verse, and combining the words into a kind of watery languor that soothes the ear and perhaps purchases the attention. But the art of musical language should be an accessory of the greater art. We need music to usher in the successive visions of a poet, to give us the warmth of being smiled upon, even though what the poet has to say is difficult or bitter. All eloquence attests

the value of an urgent rhythm in poetry and in practical language. But why song is the special companion of poetry and of man, is a question that belongs to the theory of music. It belongs with the will, whereas poetry belongs with the idea. Poetry is the perfecting of the individual nature of an idea.

We consider such symbolic or visionary thinking to be very rare, and that a special star attends the birth of a poet. But no doubt these metaphors and mystic fancies play in the firmament of every mind. They are of the nature of mind. In childhood we heeded them, but in age our eyes are downward. Education reduces us to prose. We are told that we must get understanding, we must not linger and behold.

Yet the most logical thinker will sometimes discover the value of these early lightnings, and let them clarify his groundwork. Catching some fleeting metaphor or personification, he holds it before him, and reasonably enlarges it into a simile, a parable, an allegory; and these interpreted are poetry. Mythical story is a poem of this kind; it is the poem of the race. Mythology floats above the affairs of Greece, as fancy above the cares of your life, and illumines them. Out of myth, and so out of poetry, arises the religion of ideals. This mortal discontent with abstraction, this yearning back to the sensuous and concrete, has its highest fruition in the personification of our hopeful ideas. Religious faith is the culminating poem.

The same daring spirit that tells "unbodied joy" in the form of an invisible skylark singing, has told love in the unapproachable form of Venus, wisdom in the courageous figure of Minerva. It was not abstract ideas of health and beauty and lightness, but visible Apollo, who moulded Greek life. And when Apollo was gone, then Plato came and declared that the ideas were still there. Health and beauty and lightness—these abstract things exist in perfection and can be seen, not with the sensual eye, but with the eye of the mind. So his evening prayer was a prayer, not to the Deity, not to the beautiful and good, but to Beauty and Goodness. He substituted the image of a word with its meaning for the image of a god with his meaning. And so, if he had known it, he justified all their poetry and their religion. Not the definition but the existence of poetry is a mystery. Poetry marries the seen with the unseen world, but we have not guessed the nature of this union.

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